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ABSTRACT

The basic purpose of education is to prepare people to be successful in the world which will exist during their life span. Present day education is failing in this because our schools were organized for the industrial era. The resulting model requires that phenomena be predictable, understandable, and unidimensional. Today, we know that everything must be seen as it relates to everything else, that there is no such thing as truly objective analysis or action, and that all actions involve risk. Population expansion, new migration patterns, and new environmental concern have led us to require tolerance for ambiguity and appreciation for cultural diversity. The next predictable revolutionary change will emerge from the continued development of the technology of telecommunication. All people will be required to have the following basic skills: (1) to live with others in diverse communities; (2) to seek learning throughout the life span; (3) to make decisions about defined situations, while being aware of the interconnections with other situations; (4) to produce creative ideas about the ways a given situation can be improved; and (5) to distinguish between situations which need to be resolved with major change and those for which it is best to work within current realities. To meet these requirements will involve changing the fundamental psychology of the educational system. Community control must become real, communications between different systems must improve, and we must learn to cooperate while leaving cultural differences intact. (KH)

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CREATING A DESIRABLE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Robert Theobald

In order to discuss education effectively, some understanding of the basic underlying purpose of education must be shared. Education, in its broadest sense, should prepare people to be successful in the world which will exist during their life span.

The current educational system was designed to prepare people to live in the industrial era. What did the industrial era require? It needed a well-disciplined factory and office labor force who would stay on the job, obey orders, and be as efficient as possible. Society needed people who believed that hierarchical systems were the ways to get things done: orders were, therefore, obeyed without question. Also needed was a situation where people would always have unsatisfied desires for goods and services so that they would not continuously quit their jobs as they gained enough money, as was often the pattern early in the nineteenth century.

As might be expected, the school was organized to function along the same lines as the rest of the industrial-era system. The teacher was the equivalent of the boss in the office and the factory: the teacher both knew what needed to be known and was responsible for maintaining order. Thus, the students, during school years, learned not only the basics which were essential for efficient work in the industrial era but also

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absorbed the styles of behavior which would stand them in good stead as they entered the labor force.

Today, it can be seen that the world of the future will work quite differently. First, one can understand that everything is connected to everything else: one must, therefore, learn to teach in interconnected ways. One can neither effectively study a subject nor act creatively without recognizing that all actions have consequences and that these consequences continue to reverberate through the socioeconomic system for indefinite periods of time. All too often the secondary and tertiary effects of decision making may contradict and annul the first intentions. To put it another way, there are very few points at which a decision will really change the direction of a society--many action patterns fail to be effective over time because the desired change cannot be achieved in the particular way that is tried.

Second, there is no such thing as truly objective analysis or action. Everybody is biased. Our biases emerge from our experience and different people will see the same situation differently. It is hopeless to strive toward an absolutely correct answer, for nobody is going to be willing to admit that their truth is wrong. It may be possible, however, to approach a broader vision on a gradual basis as people listen to others and learn new perceptions and ideas which they have previously ignored or not perceived at all.

Third, all action is risky. There are no certainties in life. One must always balance probabilities. Thus, there is

no absolutely right or wrong set of actions. People with different personalities and styles of thinking will want to accept different levels of risk and challenge. Thus, for example, an individual may choose a project where the chance of success is only 60 percent and has high gains, as compared to a project with a 90 percent chance of success but far lower gains. It is unrealistic to blame the person for incorrect perceptions if the project eventually is unsuccessful because there was an accepted 40 percent chance of failure. Similarly, a person should not blame the self under these conditions.

If the world is interconnected, if objectivity is impossible and if risk is inevitable, we clearly need to teach people new patterns of thought, and also to teach them in new ways. This is the fundamental challenge which confronts education at all levels. It is not enough to make small modifications within current patterns. It is the overall patterns themselves which are making it impossible for us to provide children, and indeed adults, with the conceptual skills they require to understand the pattern of events which surround them in today's world.

The complexity of events continues to increase. Most people find themselves hopelessly confused by the pace and pattern of events in the world today. They will continue to be unable to make sense of their world so long as they try to analyze it within the industrial era models which they have been taught. These older models require that events be predictable, understandable, and unidimensional. One has to

learn to operate with a far greater tolerance of ambiguity than has ever been the case in the past.

The Driving Forces

The need for a tolerance of ambiguity is reinforced by the rapidity of change in many areas. Among them:

Rich-Poor Country Tensions. It is obvious that the stress on the poor countries of the world has not yet reached its peak and that the relationships between the rich and the poor countries of the world must be expected to continue to worsen.

Past American Population Changes. The "bulge in the snake" phenomenon is only now beginning to get the attention it deserves. Few people understand how this will continue to disrupt the overall structure of the United States over the next 50 years.

Migration Factors. The migration from north to south is now well established and will almost certainly continue for most of the remainder of the century. The shift from urban to rural areas is only now taking hold and will, given people's desire to escape the cities, be very difficult to manage.

Land, Air, Water Constraints. Even though the environmental consciousness which developed in the 1960s and burgeoned in the early 1970s is under attack, the realities of the situation prevent any real cutbacks in commitments. Our environmental problems are sufficiently serious that they can threaten the long run health and safety of the population.

Energy/Resource Availability. While it may be possible to obtain enough resources for a long time into the future, costs

will be higher. This different pattern of costs will force significant infrastructure shifts: it may be impossible to maintain all of the present capital stock. To take one example, the deteriorating road and bridge situation is becoming critical in many parts of the country.

Climate. There is much disagreement among meteorologists about this issue. The climate of most of the twentieth century has almost certainly been unusually benign and stable.

Telecommunications. The technology of telecommunications will continue to develop because there is no real opposition to it at the present time, although different groups hope that it will be used for different purposes. Telecommunications is the next revolutionary force, to be followed almost certainly by genetics.

All of these driving forces must be placed in the context of massive world wide instability and the real risk of World War III.

Skills for the Communications Era

What then are the primary skills that have to be taught if we are to be able to live in the society that has been created? There are at least five requirements. They cannot be listed in order of importance, for they are all required if people are to be prepared to live successfully in what can be called the communications era. The five requirements are as follows:

1. The need to help people gain the skills which will enable them to live happily and creatively with others in their communities. For this to be possible

we shall need to create a far greater diversity of communities then presently exists in America and to make it easier for people, as they grow and change, to move from community to community, where their skills can be used effectively. The availability of different languages which provide different windows on the world will help in this task.

2. The need to help people to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses and provide them with the information and knowledge which will enable them to chart a life course which will be satisfactory to them and supportive of the communities in which they choose to live. It is in this context that the idea of learning to learn--rather than learning a subject once and for all--is critical.

3. The need to teach people the ability to look at a defined situation and to make good decisions about the best ways to deal with that situation, while being aware of the interconnections with other areas of their lives as well as the patterns of risk involved in any decision making.

4. The need to teach people the ability to look at a situation and to produce imaginative and creative ideas about the ways in which that situation can be changed for the better so that all those involved in it have more chances of meeting their purposes and their goals.

5. The need to teach people the ability to distinguish between situations where it is wise to work within current realities and those that can only be resolved on the basis of creative thinking and significant change.

What implications do these requirements have for present patterns of education? Many of the following ideas have been around for many years but they have not affected significantly the momentum of the educational establishment. Hopefully, the meaning of these ideas will emerge far more clearly in the context of the previous discussion.

> Education must be life long; people must have the chance to continue to learn so long as they are alive. In a risky, uncertain, interconnected world, one can survive only if one continues to learn.

This goal is a common one and some progress has been made toward it. However, its full implications have not been understood for primary, secondary, and vocational education. The relatively rigid age grading that exists in the schools does not recognize the reality that each person may need to learn different subjects at different ages.

The sooner people of very different ages can learn together, the sooner can some of the pathologies be diminished which have emerged from confining young people largely to talking to people in their own age group. Why is there an unwillingness to mix young, middle-aged, and old people in the same learning situation? The answers are to be found in the vision of education as a carefully orchestrated progression of learning which makes children ready for the world of work and

enables them to stay in it for the rest of their life. This model is not suitable for the world that has been described.

> Education must cease to be largely confined to the schoolroom and must once again emerge from it and be integrated with life.

Marshall McLuhan made the point a number of years ago. He tells of the two kindergarten kids walking down the street and identifying planes as they fly overhead. When they come to the schoolroom door, one of them turns to the other and says: "Let's go in and string those darn beads." What has to be asked is how much of the present educational system consists of stringing "darn beads."

Many schools are reality poor as compared to the outside environment and television. People all too often endure school because they must. In the central cities, schools are frequently the highest crime areas and sending our children to them is equivalent to indoctrinating them into a criminal life style.

> Apart from a relatively limited core set of needs, different people need to be able to benefit from different educational experiences if they are to be able to develop their strengths and minimize their weaknesses. The fundamental problem with much competency-based education today is that it tends to assume that all skills need to be achieved by all students. The result of this situation may be to force children to learn subject areas where they may never be competent rather than permitting them to develop their understandings and skills in those areas where they might become exceptional thinkers.

There is an assumption built deep into our educational system that the average student wants to do as little work as possible. If this is true, it follows that the only way that the educational system can be successful is to force learning

on students. There is considerable evidence that this viewpoint is incorrect. First, it is known that students who are effectively challenged by teachers tend to do very well in their studies. Second, there is evidence that students who are given a chance to state their needs are very often highly aware of them.

The psychology of the present educational system has deep roots in the Puritan ethic. That old psychology needs to be examined in the light of the new psychological learnings which show that the people are capable of rising to challenges when they are given an opportunity to do so.

> There is a need for more effective community control of the educational system. This rhetoric is used frequently but the harsh reality is that the average local school board does not have enough up-to-date information to be able to make good decisions.

If the rhetoric of local control is to become real, two steps must be taken. First, the access of the interested local school board to imaginative and creative thinkers in the field of education must be improved. Second, ways must be found in which people in the community more effectively can communicate their feelings about appropriate styles of education to the teaching and administrative staff of the local educational bodies.

New Access Points

The most relevant and accessible sources of information in today's world are people who have been through an experience and can inform others of what they have done. Recognition of this reality, coupled with the computer and microelectronics

revolution, will force changes in the methods of collecting, organizing, and disseminating information. There needs to be developed a real time, on-line process of accessing most forms of information. The process of developing such information bases will be achieved through cooperative behavior in which groups of people will work together without demanding individual credit for their efforts. What might be done now is suggested below.

The prime movers need to be discovered at all levels of the society--those people who are aware that the future is created on the basis of self-fulfilling and self-denying prophecy and are prepared to act to change the images that people hold of the past, present, and future. These prime movers would both be available for consultation in what has been called a "living library of competent individuals" and would assume the responsibility of trying to encourage their community to engage in activities which help to change the community, the state, and the region in directions which seem favorable.

It has long been known that much of the work in any system is done through invisible networks, rather than through the visible, formal authority systems. This is true both for organizations and within communities. Both need to be identified for organizations and within communities. The people need to be identified who cause informal networks to operate, not only within the educational system but also within local communities, states, regions, and the total country.

Most people would agree that exciting activities could develop if it were possible to identify the prime movers in various systems, interlink them with others who work in this informal way, and thus increase the scope of change. Many past dissemination efforts have failed because they have tried to create new channels for moving information rather than taking advantage of existing interest groups who share the concerns of those trying to move the information. The process used here can tie into existing patterns. Information about Action Linkage, which is one of the ways in which efforts are being made to put people in contact with each other, can be obtained from Box 2240, Wickenburg, Arizona, 85358.

The Role of Diversity

During the industrial era a major effort was made to create a melting pot. There was a felt need to turn everyone into Americans by getting rid of their cultural roots because it was believed that only when people saw themselves as Americans could the nation have the unity that it needed.

During the seventies, it was discovered that the melting pot never really melted--that ethnic concerns and race patterns persisted to a far greater extent than had even been realized in the past. There have been mixed reactions to this realization.

Fortunately, there is an increased awareness that fundamental diversity is a strength rather than a weakness. There is no objective truth, the more points of view that can be brought to bear on an issue, the greater the chance of

seeing the overall reality. Instead of acting like the blind men who touched an elephant and insisted that the part they were touching was the whole, it is necessary to work together to sort out complex realities and be able to interrelate with them more effectively than has been done in the past.

In this context, the discussion about the relationship between the various cultures needs to be totally restructured. The differences between everyone are potential sources of strength rather than weakness. Similarly, the various languages spoken provide different windows on the world that can be used to deepen understanding of this incredibly complex world in which we live.

The primary difference between the industrial era and the communications era is between the competitive models of the industrial era and the cooperation of the communications era. Everyone is needed, with all their differences.

In the communications era, the person most valued is the one who is able to stretch to work with people who have profoundly different visions. Hopefully our interaction will be a small step toward enabling us to see in cooperative rather than competitive ways.

It is my good fortune to be tied to a number of activities which are now going on to re-examine how education should be structured to prepare people for the 21st century: we should never forget that the child born in 1983 will graduate from high school after the year 2000. Let us hope that the

traditions from which we come can mutually enrich the future we want.

I never did care for the melting pot image. It suggested to me a dirty gray color as all the tints from the various cultures were mixed together in a least common denominator. How much brighter the future would be if we could learn to think about a cloth in which the various cultures were varied colored threads contributing to a brilliant pattern.